Minister of HIV

December 19, 2012 By Trent Straube

When Andrena Ingram applied to attend seminary, a bishop asked her what gifts she brought to the church. “Well,” she responded, “I’m an alcoholic, I smoked crack, my husband beat me up, and I’m living with the virus.” She was accepted, and for the past five years, the Reverend Ingram has been pastor of St. Michael’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, where she’s as outspoken as ever (the church offers HIV testing, and visitors to the popular Saturday community meal will find condoms in the fellowship hall).

Ingram, 57, expects she got HIV from her days living on the streets in New York City. In 1993, her husband died, not of AIDS, she says, but of shame and stigma. “He told me he was positive; six months later, he died—then I received my diagnosis.”

During this dark time, the church offered her direction—and eventually a vocation—and now she’s returning the favor. Through her blog and Facebook ministry, she hears “horror stories” of HIV discrimination at houses of worship. “I’m very strong against stigma in the church,” she says, then offers a solution: “More faith leaders need to get tested in front of their congregants.”

And one more thing: Ingram is single and looking. “I’m on POZ Personals, but maybe ‘the reverend’ is a little too much for people. Sometimes I have to throw curse words in there to show I’m real. Damn!” Here’s some info you won’t find on her profile:

What three adjectives best describe you?
Grace-filled, authentic, hilarious!

What is your greatest achievement?
Speaking to a [church] youth gathering of 33,309 senior high students in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans [which you can watch on YouTube].

If you could change one thing about living with HIV, what would it be?
Erasing the stigma—especially in the communities of faith.

What person in the HIV/AIDS community do you most admire?
The Reverend Gideon Byamugisha, an Anglican priest from Uganda. Watching how unashamedly he revealed himself spurred me to come out nationally about my HIV status within my denomination.

What drives you to do what you do?
[Knowing] how Christ lived his life touching the untouchables. Knowing that people are still living with shame and guilt and are suffering silently [because of] HIV or domestic violence or sexual abuse. [And wanting] to let others know that there is life after HIV!

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